

The old Kedah-Patani Trade-route.

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A glance at the map will shew that the whole length of the boundary between Kedah and Siam from the Perak border to the Perlis frontier consists of irregular masses and chains of hills rising in places to a height of more than 3,000 feet.

The actual boundary is an imaginary line between certain fixed points on the crests of these hills following the watersheds so that all streams flowing westwards are within Kedah territory and these flowing to the east within the dominions of Siam.

The whole of this frontier region is covered with a thick forest growth which renders it almost impassable except in certain naturally favoured regions to the passage of human beings.

In the course of time man in his journeyings has discovered the easiest passages through this chain of hills and has gradually confined himself to certain definite tracks which usually follow the beds of streams until some suitable vantage point is reached for crossing the divide.

From very early times it must have been known that the easiest and most direct trade route between the thriving Malay States of Patani and Kedah was through the defile known as Gěnting Pahat. The chiselled-out pass (Boundary Stone No. 34), and until the completion of the railway from Patani to Senggora and its continuation thence to Kedah this route was still in vogue for the droving of cattle and the passage of Patani field labourers to Kedah territory for the rice harvest.

As this route in its latter stages has seldom been traversed by Europeans and as the rapid development of road communication in Kedah may at any time bring it into prominence again a short description of the route as it was in June of this year may not be without interest.

Leaving Alor Star in a motor car a short hour's run along a new and good road brings the traveller to Kuala Něrang twenty miles distant where the road ends on a bluff a hundred feet above the river and some two hundred yards below the confluence of the Padang Těrap and Pědu streams. Kuala Něrang is a growing village and the headquarters of the whole district of Padang Těrap which stretches as far as the Siamese frontier.

Crossing the river at this point the route follows the right bank of the Padang Tĕrap stream sometimes approaching within a stone's throw of the river and at others diverging from it to a depth of half a mile or more owing to the sinuous nature of its course. The country is open and roughly cultivated by Malays who have planted sporadic groves of coconut durian and other trees whilst themselves living near the banks of the main river and planting rice wherever the configuration of the ground admits.

The first kampong of any importance is Bĕlimbing after which at about the third mile a range of low hills called Bukit Kĕpah is encountered which have to be skirted before emerging on the plain of Padang Tĕrap which used to be the site of the headquarters of the district until they were moved to Kuala Nĕrang some eight years ago.

The path now crosses the Sungei Sari a small shallow stream which descends from the region of the mines at Pintu Wang and touching the outskirts of the villages of Padang Chĕnĕrai, Poka and Pĕring leads to the kampong of Padang Sanai where there is a Police Station on the banks of the river.

The distance from Kuala Nĕrang to Padang Sanai is roughly ten miles and the traveller who wishes to do so may return from here to Kuala Nĕrang by perahu being poled down stream in twice the time which it takes to walk.

Leaving Padang Sanai the way at the end of a mile passes through the village of Pĕngkalan Pa Tanai where there is a Siamese wat of bamboo construction and then fording the main stream which is by now only a very clear burn running swiftly over a bed of shinning black boulders and pebbles strikes for Kuala Sĕraya where there is a moribund Quarantine Station with a solitary Malay in charge and an already defunct Police Station.

The distance of 3 miles between Padang Sanai and Kuala Sĕraya consists of a stretch of flat open and almost park like land dotted with young trees of no great height, but after this the country becomes more thickly wooded and its surface is broken into ridges whilst the path follows the parent stream more closely and every now and then descends into it and emerges on the further bank only to cross the sector of a bend and dip into the stream again.

At Kuala Sĕraya the stream divides the left hand branch proceeding N. W. to Kampong Sĕraya 3 miles distant which is a large village of some sixty Malay houses, whilst the main stream continues on to Kampong Durian Burong which is at a like distance from Kuala Sĕraya.

Between the Quarantine Station at Kuala Sĕraya and the village of Durian Burong which is a Malay village of 20 houses standing pleasantly in rice fields and groves of coconut and betelnut

palms there are no human habitations, and the country remains untouched except where it has been cleared at various times in patches for the cultivation of hill padi or maize.

The hills now begin to close in on either hand and form a rough wedge into the heart of which the traveller proceeds. Two miles after leaving the village of Durian Burong the path debouches into a little glade in the hills dotted with fruit trees which have run wild and having all the appearance of a deserted village.

This is indeed the case and the only name by which it survives in local memory is Kampong To Naidam Mok after an old Siamese of that name who last held the position of Naidam or official in charge of cattle quarantine and dues at that spot.

The track here branches into two that on the right leading through the Siamese district of Tiba to Patani whilst that on the left entering the jungle follows the rough course of what may still be termed the main stream for some two miles further to its source at Batu Këlikir (Boundary Stone 31) where there is an imperceptible gravelly watershed leading into the Siamese district of Chënak whence there is an easy descent to the village of Ban Pëkop some two miles distant from the frontier and inhabited by Malays.

The path on the right winds round the shoulder of a hill for a mile and then enters the little village of Përduan Sungkai situated near the banks of the Sungei Timun another small rivulet which comes down from the frontier and joins the stream from Batu Këlikir a short distance below.

This little village of less than ten houses is the last outpost of Kedah territory in this region and is inhabited solely by Siamese who do not speak Malay and live by a little general cultivation of maize and hill rice though they also possess a series of diminutive rice fields.

The way now lies through the heart of the forest covered hills and follows the winding course of a boulder strewn stream the Sungai Gënting Pahat which mounts gradually.

In places the path actually follows the bed of the stream but generally a way has been found along the shoulders of the impending hills which hem it in when not too steep and consequently owing to the easy gradient and the absence of any stiff climbs the walking is comparatively simple.

At the end of two miles the stream continues its course along the hillside to the right whilst the path takes a sharp turn to the left and enters a narrow defile or cutting on the very crest of the hill through which can be seen the bright sky on the further side. it merges into the slopes of the hill on either hand.

This cutting which is the actual Gěnting Pahat is some fifty yards long by ten feet deep and though only 3 feet broad at the bottom widens gradually from the height of a man's shoulders until it merges into the slopes of the hill on either hand; it is probably due to the action of two small streams rising on different sides of the watershed eating back gradually until their valleys have coalesced.

The walls of the cutting are composed of reddish earth plentifully mixed with small black pebbles and may have been shaped as the name appears to imply or merely be due to the wearing effects of traffic. In the centre of the cut is the boundary stone (No. 34) which divides Kedah from Siam and at the end of it in Siamese territory is the prostrate trunk of a giant Měrbau which has defied decay for many a year and is regarded as a kěramat whereon the suppliant or thankful passer by lays a stone of propitiation. The nearest village in Siamese territory on the further side of the border is Sěnaok some two miles distant whence the way is open to Patani.

